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DISAFFECTED RUSSIAN DESCRIBES LIFE IN SOVIET FORCED LABOR CAMPS

Anatol Borisov is a 28-year-old Russian who spent 3 years in Soviet forced labor camps. Recently, he succeeded in escaping from the Soviet Zone of Germany into the British Zone. Borisov was born in Moscow in 1921. Like his father, he was a member of the Communist Party. At the age of 14, while still in school, he served as drummer in the local Red Army regiment. At 18, he was imprisoned for a minor infraction of military regulations. When he was set free in 1942, he was again inducted into the Red Army and saw active duty until the end of the war. Since his military record was very good, he was appointed to a military civil service position in Königsberg (Kaliningrad). Later, he was put in charge of a gasoline depot in the vicinity of Preussich-Eilau (Bagrationovsk) in East Prussia. It was from there that he fled into the British Zone. The following is Borisov's own story.

I am giving up my Soviet citizenship until such time as the present Communist regime becomes no more than a bad memory. This is not a sudden decision. Since the day in 1939 that I was sent to a slave labor camp, I have known that nothing good could be built on such bad foundations. When I fought in the war I did so knowing that I was fighting for my homeland, not for those who administered my country. Since 1945 I have known that the lowest salaried German worker is in a better position than even the average Russian. The complete enslavement of mind and the total lack of all freedoms are things which cannot be appreciated until one gets outside the Soviet Union and sees how other people live. When one has once gotten outside the USSR, he understands that the Soviet leaders live only for personal power, greed, and self-interest, and that no other factor enters into their consideration. I do not wish to return to Russia until these men are thrown from power, and the Russian nation can arrange its life as it pleases.

I was sentenced to military prison in 1939 after I had overstayed my leave by only a few hours. However, the real reason was the fact that the political commissar of my regiment was jealous of my position with my sweetheart, whom he would have liked to marry, and this was his way of getting me out of his way.

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Eight days after my arrest, the military tribunal of the Volga Military District deprived me of my freedom for 3 years on the charge of absence without leave, in accord with Section 7, Article 193, of the Criminal Code. They decided that I should spend this time in forced labor camps.

Three days after I was sentenced, I was thrown into cell No 283 in the Penzapa /probably Penza/ Jail. There were 96 other prisoners in this very small cell. The air in the cell was foul, and the odor from the open toilet turned one's stomach and gave the inmates violent headaches. Forty-six of the inmates slept on planks, the others on the ground. As is usual in this type of prison, those who slept on planks were major criminals, i.e., real criminals. Political prisoners and "enemies of the people" slept on the ground. The jail sentences handed down for thievery and robbery seemed ridiculous compared to the 10- and 15-year sentences given to political prisoners. Since I was only 18 and inexperienced, I thought at first that the political prisoners who had drawn such heavy sentences must have committed major crimes. However when I became acquainted with the political prisoners who were in the cell, and when I learned the reasons for their sentences, I was completely astonished. For example, there was Ivan Marenkov. He had worked in a shoe cooperative in Penza. His 11-year-old son had sung a mocking song in the street about Stalin, and as a result Marenkov had been thrown in jail on charges of agitation. Another example was 22-year-old Grigoriy Spiridonov. After graduating from a school of journalism, he had been appointed to a newspaper in Golovinshchinskiy Rayon. One day he published a picture of Stalin on the front page of the newspaper, while on the other side of the page and in the same column was a caricature of the workers of that area shown as a rhinoceros. When the page was held up to the light, the rhinoceros's horn seemed to be emerging from Stalin's neck. Spiridonov, who had been responsible for that issue, was arrested the same day, and after being held for 5 months, was sentenced to 10 years in jail by three judges belonging to the secret police organization.

The food was bad and looked very unappetizing. We were given 400 grams of bread, 15 grams of sugar, and a bowl of watery soup a day. Life in the prison almost drove us crazy. The only variety in the day was the moment when the bread and soup were distributed. We waited expectantly for the day when we would be sent to camp, because there we would at least be able to breathe fresh air. At the end of November 1939, with 580 other prisoners, I was sent to work on the construction of a hydroelectric power plant at Kuybyshev. There were 55,000 prisoners in the Molotov area and at least 17,000 prisoners in the camp to which I was sent. When we arrived at the camp, officials lined us up and asked us our names, surnames, and the crimes for which we had been sentenced. Sixty prisoners, who had been arrested 12 to 18 months before, did not know what they were charged with nor for how long they had been sentenced. The camp receiving official told them what their crimes and punishments were.

After a quarantine of 3 weeks, we were assigned to various construction brigades. I was assigned to a brigade digging connecting ditches. In the hut where our group slept, there were two rows of bunks, three tables, a few wooden benches and a stove which was lit only in the evening. However, since the walls were full of cracks, the heat of the stove was of no use whatever. There were no linens, quilts, or blankets, and we slept in our work clothes. The daily program was as follows. We got up at 0600 and had breakfast between 0600 and 0700. Breakfast generally consisted of one third of a liter of watery vegetable or grain soup. The daily bread ration was distributed in the morning, and the amount, depending upon the work being done, was between 300 and 700 grams. At 0700 we were lined up in order to be marched to work. After an inspection had been made, the half naked and hungry workers marched to work on foot in the freezing cold. Some of the prisoners would stagger and fall from the cold, fatigue, sickness, or hunger, and dogs would be set upon them. The dogs, like hungry wolves, would hurl themselves upon these poor unfortunates and tear their already ragged clothes, frequently biting them, tearing their flesh, and drawing

blood. These prisoners, with blood streaming from their wounds, would try hopelessly to catch up with those who had gone ahead, but the latter were not permitted to stop. While all this was going on, loud-speakers in the vicinity of the work areas would blare forth the news that there was no other country in the world where the people had so much freedom.

After we arrived at the work area, the camp would be searched from top to bottom. The purpose of this search was to uncover prisoners who had hidden themselves in the lavatories, in corners, or under bunks, because they found it impossible to work in their state of complete exhaustion. When such prisoners were found, they were immediately sent to the isolation block. The isolation block in our camp was a concrete building three fourths underground. The inside was divided into small cells, with concrete floors. There were wooden gratings on the floors which were always covered with water. There was one small window in every cell which permitted very little light to enter. In the summer, prisoners were placed in these cells clad only in their underwear. In the winter, they were permitted to retain their clothing, but this could never protect them from the violent cold which pervaded the cells. The daily food ration was about 200 grams of bread and three quarters of a liter of watery soup. Even the most healthy, after staying a few days in these isolation cells, were sent directly to the hospital.

The work, which began early in the morning, continued until dark, with a half-hour pause for lunch. The noon meal consisted of bread which we had kept from morning, and the evening meal of soup and fish. However, very often we could not keep the bread until noon. On Sundays we were given a little meat. Before the war with Germany, we had 2 days' rest a month, but after the war began, this was done away with. After the evening meal we were free until 2200. We spent this time patching our rags and binding up the soles of our shoes with wire. Inspection was made at 2230, and the lights were extinguished at 2300. The right to write and receive letters was given only to those prisoners who had completed the required amount of work and who had received no punishment in the camp.

During the first year I spent in the camp I was hospitalized twice as a result of the bad food and extreme fatigue. Toward the end of the year I was able to enroll in the camp band, and since I played only in the evenings I had an opportunity to study at close range the life of the camp and labor officers. The camp leaders consisted of the unit commanders, the hut leaders, and the people who worked in the camp administrative office. The labor officers were composed of the skilled workmen, the overseers, and the accountants. These were a privileged class. They slept in good-floored, clean, warm barracks and had linen and blankets. They also had orderlies to clean the barracks, make the beds, and wash their laundry. Their food rations were greater, and they were given a fixed wage so that they could buy food products from the canteen. Their clothes and shoes were also of good quality, and they helped to keep the prisoners under control.

The heaviest jobs were always given to the political prisoners. Approximately 80 percent of the prisoners had been condemned because of political crimes and their sentences ranged from 8 to 15 years. The crimes they had committed were so unimportant that a person would be amazed. For example, my bunk-mate, 52-year-old Maksim Mikhailovich Vatsin, was a farmer on a collective farm in Svishchevskiy Rayon, Penza Oblast. During the shortage in the Volga area in 1937, he was asked, while waiting in line one day to obtain bread from an oven, from which collective farm he came. Because the farm on which he worked was called "Victory," he replied, "The name of our farm is 'Victory,' but in truth it is 'Defeat.' Half the collective farmers are suffering from hunger." When he obtained his bread and returned to the farm, he was immediately arrested. Eight months later, he was condemned to 10 years' imprisonment by the NKVD on charges of agitation. When I learned of facts like these I wondered whether all these people were really criminals, or whether they had been sent there merely to assure the state cheap labor.

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Construction activity came to an end in October 1940, and approximately 1,000 of us were sent to the Svirsk Lumber Camp in Vologda Oblast. After remaining in the lumber camp for about 3 months, I was again assigned to construction work. This time we laid water mains in the city of Vytegra. We constructed barracks there, laid wires, and dug a few ditches. Then the war with Germany began. Our food, which was already bad, became even worse. Formerly, when our clothes wore out, they gave us new clothing, but we were no longer able to obtain even this. Because of a shortage of transport and technical material, work progressed very slowly and finally was stopped completely.

At the beginning of November 1941, I was transferred to work on a military airfield about 18 kilometers from Gryazovets in Vologda Oblast. We were sheltered in a church and a few tents near a small village. Seventy percent of the prisoners were political, and 60 percent of them had come from Central Asia. Consequently, they suffered greatly from the cold. Many of the prisoners contracted scurvy. Their gums bled, their teeth fell out, and a majority of the prisoners could not eat even the small bread ration given them. During December, the daily death toll was between 30 and 40. The corpses of those who died from cold or fatigue at the work site were brought to camp and stacked in a barracks like cordwood.

Although there were almost no guards in the vicinity of the camp, the prisoners were too weak to attempt escape. A delegation which inspected the camp in January 1942 reported that the remaining prisoners were no longer capable of working. Construction work was then turned over to army units, and we were sent to a rest camp in Gryazovets. Some 27,000 persons arrived at the camp, and 3 months later only 900 remained alive. From this rest camp I was sent first to a prison in Vologda and then to a forest station in Arkhangel'sk Oblast. In April 1942, I was finally set free and was immediately drafted into the Red Army.

Naturally, I felt no loyalty toward the Communist administrators of Russia. However, it was impossible for me to refuse to join the army, and I consoled myself with the thought that I was fighting not for them but for Russia. I was sent first to the 175th Reserve Regiment and then to the 160th Tank Brigade, which was still being organized in the rear. A short time later I was sent to the front lines in the vicinity of Voronezh. The memories of the 38 months I had spent in a prison camp never left me.

Finally, I decided to escape. Not long ago, while I was in Preussich-Eilau in East Prussia, which is under Soviet occupation, I saw some German soldiers who had been arrested. Since I knew that they would be sent to prison camps, I felt sorry for them and made the stupid mistake of saying so openly. I knew that I was in danger of arrest, and to remedy the situation I said that I had not really made such a statement, that I had simply joked with the German soldiers. However, I knew that that no one would believe this and that I could again expect a bitter fate. I might be arrested at any moment. There was no time to lose, and I immediately started walking toward the British Zone of Germany, which I succeeded in reaching.

Here, I am awaiting the day when my homeland shall be delivered from the Bolsheviks and will breathe the air of freedom.

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